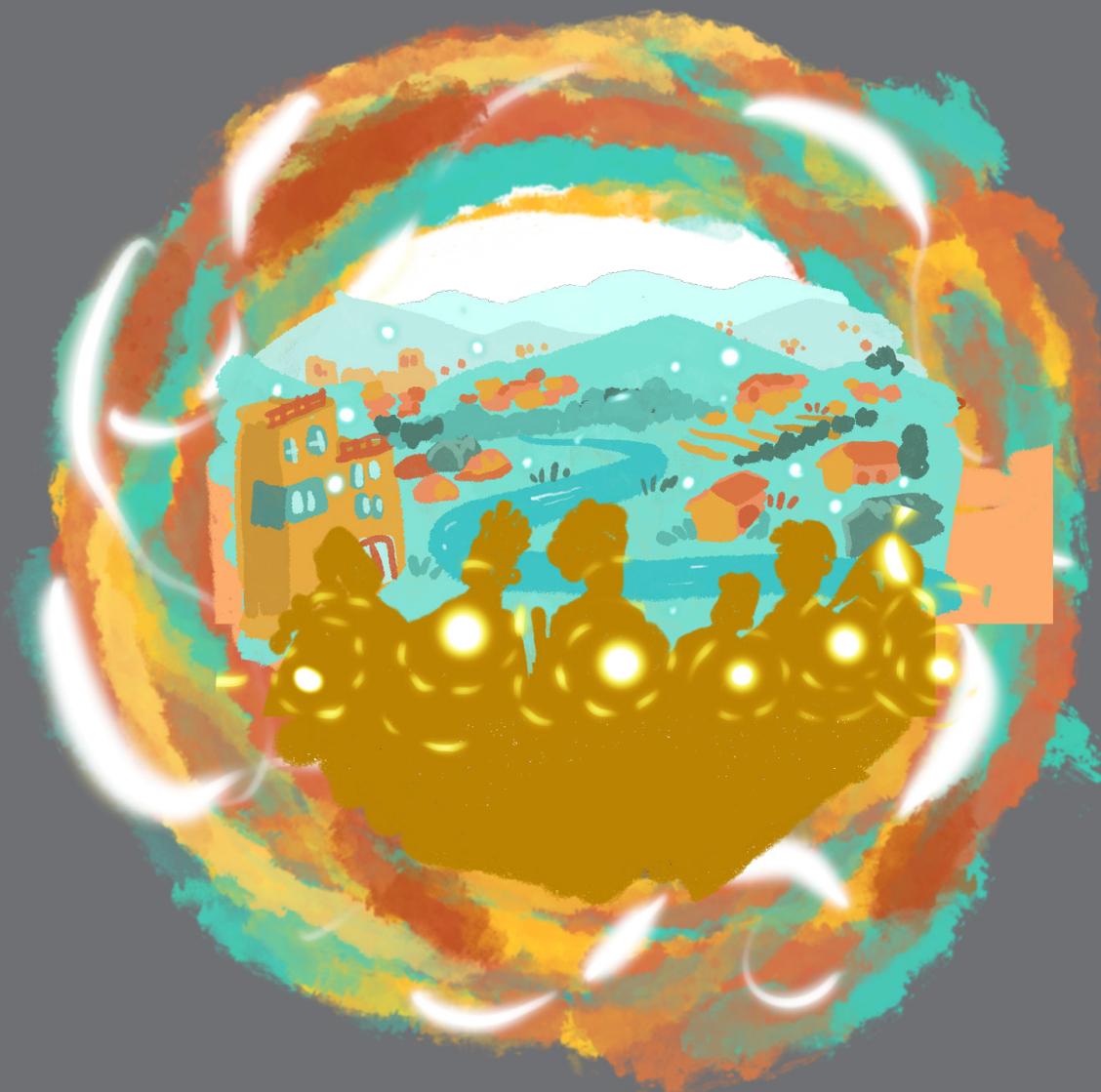


PolicyLink Health Ambassadors: **Cohort 3**

Call to Action:  
**Picturing a Transformative  
Future for Housing and  
Health**



# Introduction to Cohort 3

The Ambassadors for Health Equity program at PolicyLink<sup>1</sup> creates a year-long cohort and platform for leaders from outside the health field to share ideas and experiences, forge new alliances, and collaborate around promoting health equity in their work. Health equity is achieved when everyone, regardless of race, neighborhood, or financial status, has a fair and just opportunity for health—physical, mental, economic, and social well-being. Attaining this goal means working not only within the health-care and public-health systems, but across the many systems and institutions that affect how families live, work, learn, and play.

Recognizing the inextricable connection between housing and health, made more evident by the disparities of the Covid-19 pandemic, PolicyLink and our advisors decided that this third cohort of the program would focus on leaders who come from the housing justice world.

The 2021 Ambassadors represented different approaches to housing justice, including tenant organizing, civil rights and disability justice advocacy, culturally centered housing development, community land ownership, and federal policy advocacy.



1. Funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

These 19 leaders took part in the year-long program, emboldened to share ideas and experiences, forge new alliances, generate new solutions, and promote a Culture of Health within their own work and across networks.

Our hope was that, together, we might be able to better align ourselves for more transformative and lasting impact.

The arc of learning over this year included participants from each of those sectors presenting their history, their cultural roots and accomplishments, and the challenges that they face. Ultimately, participants collectively shared the potential future that they see contributing to housing justice.

From those historical perspectives and contributions, we were able to lift up and delve deeper into common concerns, including power building and fostering collective responsibility for housing security. The key question we examined over the year was: “How do we apply a health equity lens to the healing of our communities and our practice?”



The global pandemic made this a poignant year for a program like this. The fellowship was meant to be conducted in person, but the year ended up all virtual. These leaders participated during a time when they faced one of the most difficult years—where Covid-19 made housing security more endangered than ever. During this fellowship—while forging future landscapes—they also worked urgently on developing and enacting strong protections to endure through the Covid-19 recovery. They worked on bans on evictions, rent and mortgage forgiveness tied to relief for affordable housing providers and small landlords, and housing-first approaches for people without access to safe and healthy shelter.

PolicyLink strove to center the experience of Black, Indigenous, and people of color leaders in this cohort. What we heard from these committed leaders is that white supremacy is guiding every system that affects people’s lives as well as our current housing system which is broken beyond repair and that a new one is needed. One working group of the cohort asked “How many people have had to die for the system we have now?” This question implicated US structures and policies—from the forced removal of Indigenous people from their lands, to slavery, to those dying unhoused on the streets today.

As you will see on the pages below, the Ambassadors came together around a clear and powerful framework of shared values which, we think, could reorient our approach to housing and how we support the people who are working for that change.

At the end of 2021, PolicyLink brought the Ambassadors together to share their collective vision with a set of invited guests from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Department of Health and Human Services, Congress, and philanthropy. This report is intended to document the Ambassadors’ journey in envisioning a transformative system of housing justice and outlining the infrastructure that can be built now to lead us toward that system. We invite you to join them in picturing a more equitable approach to housing and to work with us all over the coming years to bring a new system into being.

**Michael McAfee**, President and CEO

**Ashleigh Gardere**, Executive Vice President

**Kalima Rose**, Ambassadors for Health Equity Cohort Lead

# Picturing a More Equitable Future for Housing and Health

To develop their ideas of what transformative systems of housing justice would look like, and what infrastructure they would need to build now to move toward that future, the 19 Ambassadors and their advisors worked in four small groups over the cohort's final four months. They wove their deliberations and ideas together into the final product represented here with the support of graphic recorders. Some groups worked intentionally with the graphic illustrator to produce specific images and one example of their work is captured on this page.

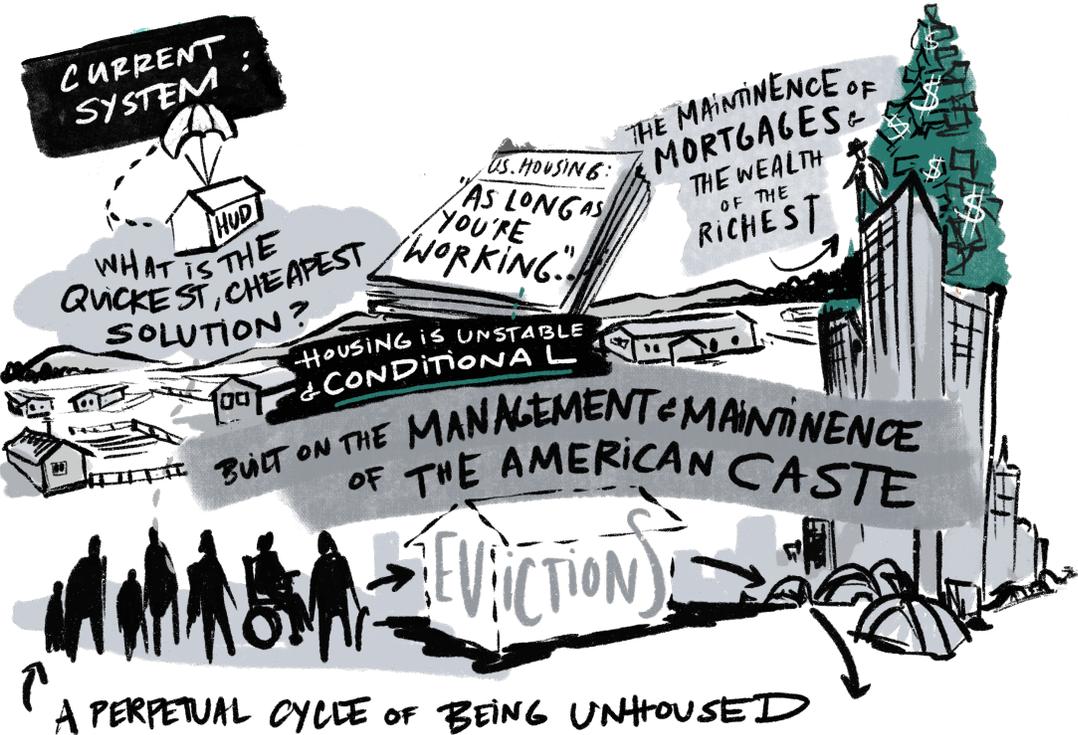
**Our vision is that housing is a human right.**

To move toward that vision, we have to start by acknowledging the past trauma so we can start to move toward healing. We want truth and reparations. We want our communities to have self-determination because those who are closest to the problems are closest to the solutions. We want to see collective liberation and an end to white supremacy.



**Housing has been the infrastructure of our racial caste system.**

We recognize the historical and ongoing state violence embedded in our housing systems and call for decolonization of these systems and investment in collective liberation. Trillions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of jobs have been invested in creating the housing system we have today—one that is based on housing as a commodity. Our housing programs have been designed to house the wealth of the rich and protect the profits of banks instead of providing homes for people. The federal government is guaranteeing trillions in mortgage profits to banks but refuses to guarantee housing to poor people.



We need to turn that on its head and re-create a liberatory system formed in the image of the communities it is intended to support. Home should be a place for healing.



VALUES OF CURRENT SYSTEM :

**LACK OF HOUSING AS:**

A MORAL FAILURE

A "NATURAL" OUTCOME OF CAPITALISM

A PROBLEM TO MANAGE

A WEAPON USED TO CRIMINALIZE

AN EXCUSE FOR DEHUMANIZATION

**HOUSING AS:**

COMMODITY STATUS

"OWNERSHIP OF LAND"

THE CALCIFICATION OF WHITENESS

**PROPERTY**

IN A JUST SYSTEM, WE VIEW/VALUE:

**LACK OF HOUSING AS:**

A FAILURE OF OUR ECONOMIC SYSTEM

PERPETUATING HISTORICAL VIOLENCE & TRAUMA

A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

AN OUTCOME OF WHITE SUPREMACY TO ACKNOWLEDGE AND REPAIR

UN-NATURAL & UNACCEPTABLE

**HOUSING AS:**

A SAFE PLACE TO GATHER

A PLACE FOR HEALING

SHELTER FROM INTENSE WEATHER

A WAY TO CONNECT WITH NATURE & THE LAND

WHERE WE NOURISH OUR FAMILY

home

**A HUMAN RIGHT**

**The starting point has to be healing.**

Our current system was built on genocide and displacement. The system cuts people's connection to space and place. Many of our stories have gone unacknowledged for too long. Healing requires truth telling. We must acknowledge the truth of what was done to our communities.



**We don't want reconciliation; we want reparations.**

Reparations function as a show of good faith—they come with no strings attached. The harm that was done to our communities built wealth for others. We want to see land returned to Indigenous hands and to community stewardship. Our people have a lot of work to do in finding our own liberation, but reparations must be part of the housing justice conversation. We need allies who may not look like us if we are going to get there.



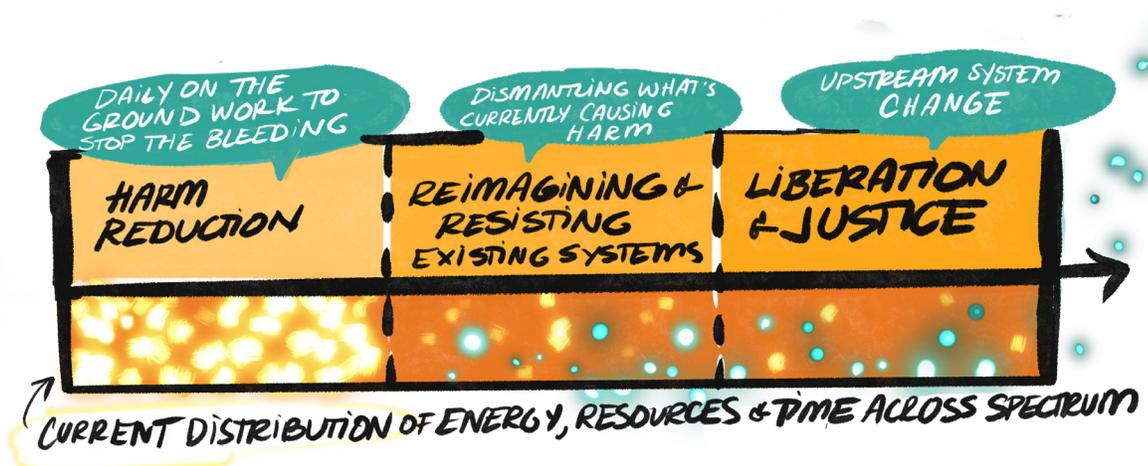
**We have a right to make choices for ourselves.**

We have a right to pursue freedoms in the way we see fit for us. Communities everywhere— urban or rural—should be making decisions using their own metrics and measures of what success is. Community stewardship and self-determination means that people can define their own housing, health, and identity within their cultural contexts. We are pushing back on narratives that Western colonialism has forced on us for too long. Our people need the freedom to take responsibility for their own futures.



## Moving beyond harm reduction.

We see our work for housing justice as falling along a spectrum. At one end, most of the work we do is about harm reduction—essentially it is about preventing death. We have to keep doing that to prevent people from literally being on or dying in the streets. Toward the middle of the spectrum the work begins to focus on “systems changes” which might reduce the amount of harm but leaves the same systems largely intact. In this work, we might help more people of color build wealth by securing housing in the commodity-based system. At the far end is the transformative work of liberation and justice where we have built entirely new systems that, from the outset, ensure racial equity and collective care for our communities. Here we might be creating community land trusts and building on other models that see housing as a source of community strength instead of only as a source of individual wealth.



We don't often get to the liberation end of the spectrum. We spend so much energy on the urgent that it is hard to get to the longer term. But the idea that we have to choose between harm reduction and liberation is making our work even more impossible.

We can't choose. Instead, what if we could all build “portfolios of work” that were more balanced—that included a mix of actions across the spectrum. If you spend all your time on harm reduction you never change the systems. But if you spend all your time doing liberatory work, you appear to be pie in the sky—your work is seen as having no immediate consequences for the people you are trying to help. We want to get to the place where we are able to have balanced portfolios—informed by harm reduction, systems change, and the building of liberatory communities.



### Measuring what matters.

To move toward greater health and equity, we have to rewrite the fundamental and foundational principles of our housing system.

This means moving toward more human-centered indicators of success—away from strictly financial indicators of success and toward

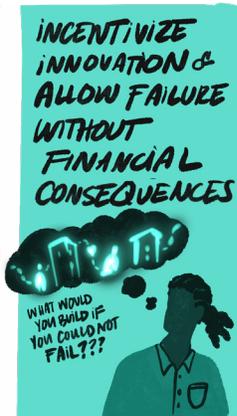
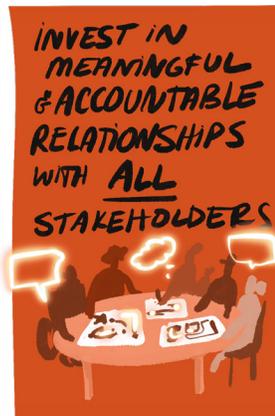
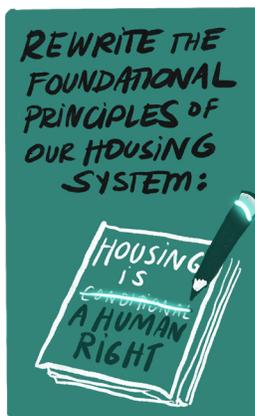
strong relationships as the source of success. We have to invest in accountable relationships with all stakeholders. Community engagement can be token box-checking or it can build relationships between grassroots communities and people in power so that folks close to the problems are the architects of our solutions.



### Supporting innovation.

We need incentives for innovation in the housing sector the way we do in technology or finance. In these sectors, the mode of trial and error allows for failure and drives more investment behind successes. In social housing pursuits, that kind of validation is not there. If you innovate in social justice work, it doesn't lead to more investment. Our collective efforts should drive greater investments in the innovations that make people healthier, move people into great homes, and enable them to thrive. We need new tools to help us invest in our own creativity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICY & PHILANTHROPY:



### A scorecard as a means.

We need new tools that enable us to envision who has the power to define success. We have a vision for equity scorecards that center an expansive notion of health equity—one that is fundamentally connected to our movement and value system. We see a tool that will support people most-impacted to shape and engage in a process of shared learning, visioning, advocacy, and accountability. A new scorecard can function as a tool for building collective responsibility and prioritizing process and community-driven outcomes.



### Communities have to define what health means for themselves.

A new scorecard can facilitate people having the power to determine how their communities are planned. Health is more than just the absence of disease. A scorecard could be used by grassroots groups to support generative conversations and codify a community vision. It can help communities evaluate how a policy might benefit or create harm for that community. And, by pointing to a community-defined notion of success, a scorecard could be used to advocate for the resources to support the processes of change envisioned by the community, and measure their progress.



**Using art to convey healing, vision, and change.**

We can't always say what we want to say directly. Art is usually the way to say a thing (without saying the thing). We currently live in a broken system, and we have to build an entirely new system. That notion is captured in just 20 seconds of Childish Gambino's "This is America." When you listen to it, you see the whole idea. Art can demand accountability to do better.

**This is how we heal America.**

What does it look like when we build these transformative systems? The play *Hamilton* demonstrates how we build a new system, that sounds and looks like us—it shows us how we tell the stories that are our stories, how we have agency. It is the story of us and we see ourselves in it.

This is how we heal America. This is how we connect with each other.



### Music can fuel our movements!

Artists are often the core and center of this work. Music can give us power. During the Civil Rights Movement singing was so important. When we couldn't agree on something we would get back to singing and it would keep us moving together. Sweet Honey in the Rock sang "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes..." Though we cannot rest, the singing together can give us fortitude for the work to achieve real change.

### How do you work in an existing system while building a new liberatory system?

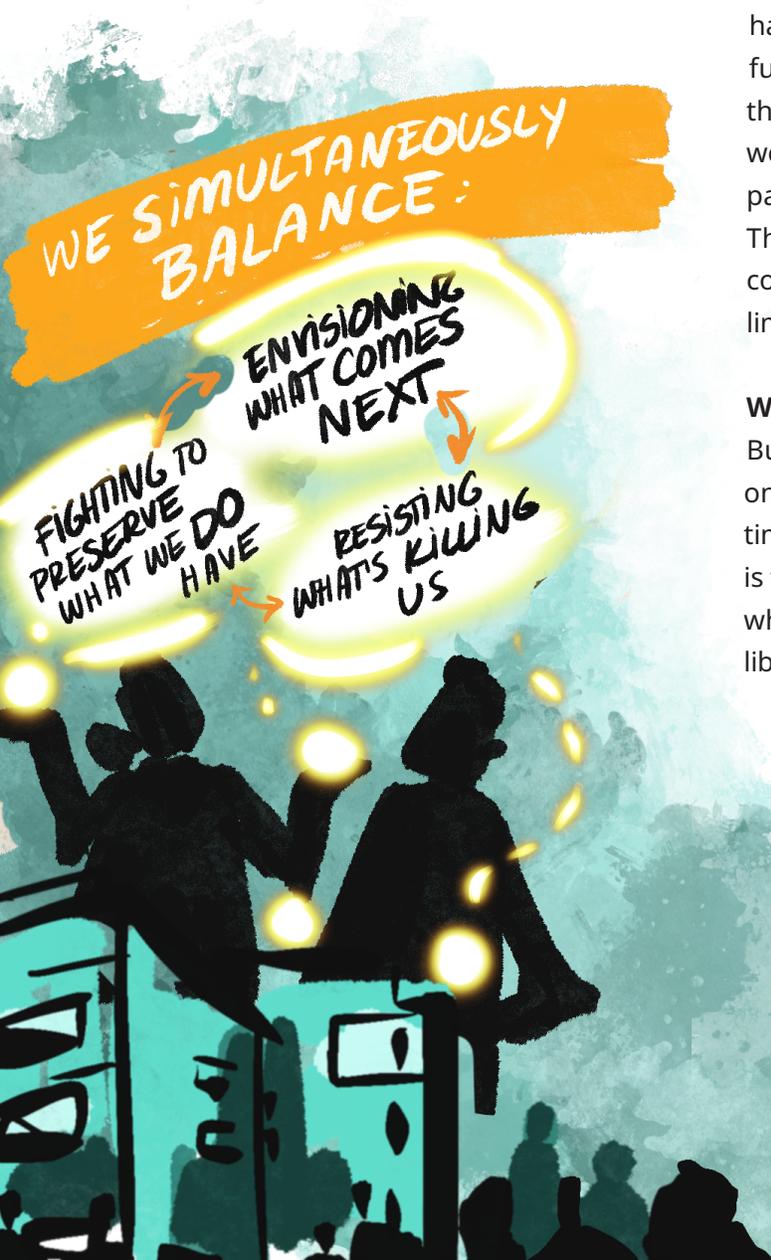
We are all doing two jobs—trying to build something new while working in a system that pits us against each other. Our movements have to incorporate art because we know that, in art, we can feel emotions together. In art, we can sit in someone else's experience. Sitting quietly or emotionally together, you can create solidarity and start to envision something new.

### Bringing our full selves to the work.

We have been granted access to spaces where we would have previously been excluded but we want to bring our full selves to these spaces and this work. Recognizing that our struggles are tied up in the struggle of others, we will represent the fullness of ourselves—not just the palatable parts of ourselves that the system accepts. That is a big part of being able to create liberatory communities. A system built on the preservation and limitations of whiteness will not work for us.

### We need time and space.

Building a new system means taking on another job on top of our existing jobs. We need support in making time and space for thinking differently. So much work is focused on outcomes that need to be tracked. And while that is important, if we are going to build a new liberatory reality, we need generative space and time.



**How we make this happen.**

This is an ambitious and aspirational vision, but we can make it a reality. Here is what it will take:

- Commit to remaking our current housing system with equity and disability justice at its center—which will cover all people—instead of white supremacy.
- Commit to an expansive definition of health and housing equity—one that is inclusive of health, race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other measures of equity and justice, centering the people most impacted by a lack of access to housing and health equity.
- Stop investing public resources into systems that view housing primarily as a commodity to drive profits.
- Prioritize investments in models that value housing as a community asset.
- Build new scorecard tools that engage, inform, and measure progress in ways that are defined by the communities that are being served.
- Address trauma and promote healing in our communities.
- Rely more on artists and integrate arts into movement-building work.
- Make more space for leaders of this work to take time out, regenerate and engage in the long-term thinking that we will need to build a new Nation.

**Together, we can make this happen.**



# Guest Reflections and Potential Action Steps

PolicyLink invited key leaders from philanthropy, policy advocacy, and government sectors to listen to and respond to the Ambassadors' final presentation. These guests reacted strongly to the vision laid out in this document. We have captured a selection of their comments and suggestions below.

*I want to thank the person who said that 'housing is the infrastructure of our racial caste system,' because that really kind of summarizes it all... and, I am surprised at how much this generation of changemakers uses the term 'liberation.' When I came into the Black liberation movement in 1968, it was all about 'liberation.' But now, 50 years later we are still talking about 'liberation.' I am not so sure that that is the term we want to embrace. Liberation suggests 'freedom from.' What is the 'from' that we are trying to pull away from? I actually think that what you are describing is how do we birth a new Nation; how do we act as the 'stewards' of that new Nation?*

**Angela Glover Blackwell, PolicyLink**

*The California Endowment led a 10-year initiative on Social Determinants of Health including housing. We thought it was all about policy wins. But we recognized that we didn't focus initially on what you have highlighted. Creating the space and time for healing. We didn't understand the significance of that—the amount of trauma and injury that has been incurred by policy violence.*

**Anthony Iton, The California Endowment**

*You know, I'm really struck by the frameworks and scorecards that you've presented, and by the recognition that you really do need to dismantle what is existing while reimagining what the future can be. That is really hard work. You do need the time and the space to do that. As a funder, what I'm taking from this conversation is that we need to figure out how to resource this and how to make it happen. Another thing that really struck me is rethinking how we do our work in philanthropy. I heard you asserting that we can't expect a community-led organization to function like a mainstream organization... Some of us have been saying this for quite some time, but I think the time is finally right for us to take hold of that and start to change our grantmaking practices.*

**Sallie George, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**

*There were two things that resonated with me most. One is the quote that 'health is not just the absence of disease.' We are always looking at health disparities that exist within communities and among the individuals and families that we work with and I think that that is a message that cannot be said too many times... and the quote that I take as my charge as someone working in the federal government is 'How do we work in an existing system while building a new liberatory system?' That is a window of collaboration for us to work with you... I would like to share this presentation with my colleagues... to revamp our own staff's understanding of poverty and racial equity.*

**Jolleen George, Office of Community Services, Administration for Children and Families,  
US Department of Health and Human Services**

*I did not anticipate the physical and emotional reaction I would get from this presentation. I love the expanded vision of health that you had and what that means. That is where my emotion started to well up. Health is physical and spiritual and mental and cultural. I loved the idea of measuring what matters. Please push philanthropy and government to measure what matters to you... In the context of work that we're doing with the Biden Administration—to support and encourage communities to take all of these unprecedented federal dollars and center racial equity in their deployment—that is something that this country has never seen before. Philanthropy can help create the space where people can take a beat and plan, what does the equitable community look like? Help us help you do that.*

**Susan Thomas, Melville Charitable Trust**

*Thank you for taking me to a place where we, as a government agency, don't usually go. You took us to the core of why we do what we do every day. The challenge of working within existing systems while trying to create new systems really resonated with me. As we try to change the federal government, we need to know that it is not going to happen overnight, but we need to set up systems of accountability to stakeholders like you so that we can be sure that the changes are real... I was struck by the focus on addressing trauma. I worked in Philadelphia on housing but it was not just about housing because we had to address the underlying trauma in the community... so I could really relate to this focus... We have a mandate from the highest level, from the President of the United States and we need you to help hold us accountable to be able to make the changes and reimagine and rebuild a system that is going to create accessibility for people who have been left out of the system for far too long.*

**Lopa Kolluri, Office of Housing and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) at the US Department of Housing and Urban Development**

*From the tribal perspective, there is a spectrum of different organizations all trying to get to housing justice. Some tribes feel like they are already where they want to be on housing and others feel like they have so far to go. It is really helpful for people to be able to look to others and see what the future could hold.*

**Tony Walters, National American Indian Housing Council**

*We need to take this presentation on the road. It's more than a presentation, it's really a call to action. I didn't expect to feel the emotions that I did, but you really put people first in your vision and you talked about healing. And that is what is missing so often.*

**Renee McLean Willis, National Low Income Housing Coalition**

# List of Ambassadors and Advisors

## Ambassadors

Throughout 2021, 19 housing justice leaders took part in the year-long program to share ideas and experiences, forge new alliances, generate new solutions, and promote a Culture of Health within their own work and across networks. The following housing justice leaders made up the 2021 cohort of Ambassadors for Equity\*.



\* These were the affiliations at the time of their participation in the fellowship program.

## Advisors

The fellowship experience was guided by six advisors\*, who include Dalila Madison Almquist of Public Health Institute, Dawn Phillips of Right to the City Alliance, Lisa Rice of the National Fair Housing Alliance, Paul Lumley of Native American Youth and Family Services, Saneta deVuono-powell of GroundWorks Consulting, Seema Agnani of National CAPACD, and Tiffany Clarke of FSG. Together, they provided mentorship, strategic direction, and curriculum content for the program.



\*These were the affiliations at the time of their participation in the fellowship program.

# Acknowledgments

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- Angela Glover Blackwell, Host, Radical Imagination Podcast/Founder in Residence, PolicyLink
- Anthony Iton, Senior Vice President, The California Endowment
- Jolleen Janelle George, Deputy Director, Office of Community Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Dr. Lanique Howard, Director, Office of Community Services, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- Lopa P. Kolluri, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Office of Housing and the Federal Housing Administration HUD
- Ruby Bolaria-Shifrin, Director of Housing Affordability, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative
- Sallie Ann George, Program Officer, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- Susan Thomas, President and CEO, Melville Charitable Trust

# Credits

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